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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that early years teachers are the most influential factor contributing to the quality of early years education. Well-educated teachers are professionally more competent and can decisively influence the quality of curriculum, which is becoming less and less centrally defined. This article describes the creation of a new program for the education of preschool teachers in Slovenia, which is the result of changes throughout the state school system. The article begins with a brief description of the current teacher education program and lists five reasons for its reform. The article next describes the process of developing the program, including research undertaken to compare Slovenia's system to other European countries, the list of issues addressed, and the parties involved. It then describes the program itself, including assumptions on which it is based, its aims, areas of knowledge into which the program is organized, its use of practice teaching, and its syllabus. Contains nine references. (EV)

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THE NEW INITIAL PROGRAMME FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN SLOVENIA

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Preschool institutions in Slovenia

The 70's and 80's witnessed a rapid growth of children attending preschool institutions. In these last years more than half of all preschool children between the ages of 1 and 7 years, in the period following the end of maternity leave until the child's entry to school, have been attending preschool institutions. The advantage of our early childhood education is that younger and older preschoolers are neither institutionally separated nor with regard to the system, and have the same preschool teachers working with them. One could say that Slovene preschool institutions operate in good material conditions, with professionally well-qualified early years teachers, yet having a drawback in limited variety and selectivity. Until recently no private kindergartens existed in Slovenia and only a negligible number of mostly very young children were included in private home care. All public preschool institutions follow the same formal curriculum. Due to a centralized leadership on the part of state advisors, the approaches and ways of work of early years teachers used to differ only slightly. In these last years, however, there has been an increase in diversity of preschool institutions and early years teachers. The proposed changes in the system itself offer possibilities for different programmes of state preschool institutions, as well as for the establishment of private kindergartens.

Parallel to the changes in the system of early years education, one can follow changes occurring in the initial training programme for early years

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teachers. Until 1991, the required qualification for the profession was a finished secondary school for early years teachers. Since then, the required qualification has been a finished 2-year higher education programme. The Faculty of Education in Ljubljana started educating early years teachers as early as 1984. In the fall of 1995 the present university programme will be replaced by a 3-year study programme as part of a professional institution of higher education, which is the result of changes in the whole vertical of the state school system. These are reflected in the changed conceptual solutions at all levels of education and in the proposals for a new school legislature.

The need for a changed programme is the result of the following facts:

1. The demand for higher education was expressed by numerous professionals and practitioners reflecting on the conditions necessary for sound work in early years education. At professional meetings, participants offered their views and standpoints about the existing programme and suggested additional contents in order to enable educators to become better equipped for the demanding work with preschool children. We managed to incorporate only some of these suggestions and minor changes into the existing programme, which has not brought about any substantial changes in the quality of the programme itself.

2. Early years teachers employed in preschool institutions completed different courses required for this profession (5-year secondary school, 4-year secondary school, higher education with various preceding secondary schools). Examinations of the results of various programmes showed deficiencies in quantity as well as in quality of such training and pointed out a need for a higher education programme for early years teachers.

3. The passing of the document Concept of Public Preschool Institutions (White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia, 1995) has brought about conceptual changes for early years education. Greater plurality of programmes and an open curriculum require high professional standards, autonomy and responsibility on the part of the teachers. Demanding professional tasks and problems call for a well educated early years teacher with good theoretical and practical training. For the early years teacher the document foresees higher education.

4. The concept of compulsory education requires 9 years of compulsory education (now 8 years), with the child entering school one year earlier than before. It will be possible for the early years teacher to work alongside the classroom teacher in this new first grade. For this role both profiles have to be designed differently from now.

5. The Higher Education Acts, adopted at the end of 1993, abolished 2-year university programmes, among them programmes like ours for the education of early years teachers, and introduced programmes within the professional institutions of higher education, lasting 3 or 4 years.

Planning the initial study programme

Planning the initial study programme is part of a greater research project, including also the planning of other programmes such as: part-time education, specialization, additional programmes for graduates from other study programmes who wish to enter into early childhood education. The preparation and implementation will be followed by the evaluation of the same.

The starting points of the initial programme were the present-day situation and the vision of the development of early childhood education in Slovenia. A critical analysis of early years educational systems and systems of early years teacher education around the world was done. The comparative analysis included data about early years teacher education in 19 European countries, whereby special attention was paid to their duration, syllabus and the extent of pedagogical practice. The main findings of this analysis are:

- The majority of countries educates early years teachers at post-secondary level, i.e. following the minimum of twelve years schooling (primary and secondary). The studies last from two to four years and are carried out at universities, institutions of higher professional education or vocational schools. Education at secondary level was found in only two schools.
- Common to all educational programmes are professional studies, subject studies and teaching practice. According to our data the relationship between them varies, while during the time of the analysis some countries might already have changed their programmes. Professional studies take up 33 to 45 % of the whole programme. In the majority of countries teaching practice takes up 20 to 36 % of the programme. Countries with a lower percentage of teaching practice are Spain (14 %), Poland (15 %), and Slovenia (in the old programme 5 %). In Finland this percentage is much higher (47 %). The greatest differences exist in the share of subject studies, which extends from 18 % in Poland to 47 % in Norway.
- From country to country syllabuses differ to a greater extent than the level and duration of studies or the relationship between the professional, subject and practical part of the programme. The range extends from 8 (Germany) to 26 (the Netherlands) subject areas. There are also great differences in the kind of subjects.

The new initial programme has been created by subject directors of the existing higher education programme. On the basis of opinions about the extent of the programme, suggestions for changes and additions, we have designed a new programme and prepared curricula for individual subjects.

Students were also invited to cooperate in the preparation. In an anonymous inquiry they expressed their opinion about the extent of the programme and about individual subjects. They suggested some changes in the contents and in the organization of studies.

In the process of preparing the new programme, professional and other dilemmas had to be solved, the most relevant being:

- university or higher education programme,
- duration: 3- or 4-year programme,
- enrollment on the basis of matura or final examination,
- relationship between professionalisation and academic studies,
- relationship between professional studies, subject studies and teaching practice,
- should the early years teacher be equally proficient in all areas of educational work or should (s)he be enabled to develop his own preferences and special abilities,
- successive, integrated or concentrated teaching practice,
- relationship between lectures, seminars and exercises,
- which subjects should be offered at the beginning: professional studies or foundations for subject studies.

The proposal of the new programme was discussed at many levels. It was frequently discussed by the teachers of the existing programme running at the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana, Department for Early Years Education. Then it was presented to three independent experts, who deal with problems of early years education, teacher education and curricula. We also met with a group of practitioners - principals, pedagogues, psychologists and early years teachers. The proposal was then discussed at Univeristy Board, where its suitability in regard with the accepted criteria for higher education programmes was examined. Finally it was discussed by members of the Professional Council for Higher Education at the Ministry of Education and Sport. The programme was then verified and will be implemented in 1995/96 academic year.

Starting points for preparation of the programme and suggested changes

Numerous foreign and Slovene studies have shown that the early years teacher is the most influential factor contributing to the quality of early years education (School Based Inservice Education, 1993). Well educated early years teachers are professionally more competent and can decisively influence the quality of syllabuses, the contents of which are becoming less and less centrally defined around the world.

Due to a rapid development of science and increasing knowledge on the part of the children, it is impossible for the early years teacher to learn, in the course of studies, all he will later have to pass on to the children. It is therefore of greater importance that (s)he learns to search for and find information and knows how to impart it to the children. (S)he should above all be an all-around person, capable of constantly seeking and finding ways

to acquire specific skills and knowledge needed for her/his work. It is unreasonable to expect her/him to be "universal", i.e. equally well versed in all areas of work. The new programme therefore gives space to a greater share of optional subjects, which enable individual students to become well equipped and qualified in those areas, wherein lie their special interests and abilities.

A tendency towards universality is still present in the conviction that early years teachers should alone be able to cope with all professional problems. To this end, they should in the process become acquainted with the various institutions and services for dealing with preschool children. The educational programme should not train early years teachers for work with children only, but also for communication with colleagues and other professionals, who can all help her/him to solve professional problems.

One of the essential changes from the old programme is a greater share of teaching practice. We believe that more teaching practice does not mean a step back into one-sided professionalisation of work, but rather the opposite. It happens that at the beginning of her/his career a graduate meets with a series of problems which he is unable to cope with because of lack of experience, thus coming to the conclusion that "theory is useless". And it is just this fact that leads to one-sided professionalisation, which is nothing but a non-critical imitation of processes of others. In the new programme we are therefore introducing the so-called integrated teaching practice, which will enable students to recognize the usefulness as well as limitations of acquired theoretical knowledge. With the help of theoretical reflection they can at the same time examine their own actions and actions of others. Next to more teaching practice, a necessary requirement for this is also an appropriate academic level of the programme, so that students can obtain sound theoretical knowledge.

Last but not least, we have slightly reduced the weekly student load, in order to enable students to dedicate more time as now to individual studies.

Aims of the new programme

The programme aims to educate and train early years teachers. The goal is to empower students to perform sound work with preschool children and with children in the first grade of primary school, as foreseen in the proposal of the new school legislature, and to work successfully with parents, colleagues and other experts. The early years teacher must know how to communicate with children as well as adults and must be able to critically analyze and evaluate her/his work.

In the process of education, the early years teachers should become acquainted with various concepts of childhood and early years education and

acquire the basic theoretical and practical knowledge of individual educational areas. These are:

- **Child and education**: various concepts of childhood and education through history up to the present, various theories about the development and learning of preschool children. These are special topics in pedagogic (theory of education, early childhood pedagogic and didactic), psychology (developmental and pedagogic psychology), sociology, philosophy, special pedagogic and health education,
- **Theoretical and practical knowledge in specific educational areas** (language, movement, dance, music, art, social environment, science, and mathematics). The basis of this is sound knowledge of subjects the early years teacher will be passing on to the children. So-called methodologies are built up on the above, and here students learn different approaches and ways of imparting this body of knowledge to preschool children of different ages. The above mentioned areas are interconnected in content (syllabuses) and in performance (integration of areas in educational work).
- **System of child care** (school system, state and private institutions, legislative, social and health care institutions). It is important that the early years teacher becomes informed about the kind of services offered by various institutions assisting the family and preschool children and that (s)he learns how to contact them. A critical analysis of how these institutions function and the relationships existing within them should also be included. It is important that future early years teachers learn about **children's rights.**
- **Communication with children and adults**: oral communication, reading, written expression, non-verbal communication and expression through art. The student should learn how to talk (dialogue, group discussion) and speak freely (rhetoric), adapt her/his way of speaking to the listener (children of different ages, parents of different backgrounds, laymen and professionals...), to listen and consider the opinion of others. Students should be trained to study independently from professional literature (understanding, critical analysis and comparing with other sources) and to write professional articles.
- **Critical scientific thinking**: capacity of analytic way of thinking and thought synthesis, ability of professional argumentation and scientific criticism.

Contents of the new programme

The syllabus includes 21 compulsory subjects, 3 optional subjects and teaching practice. Subjects are divided into professional studies and subject studies. Professional studies take up 40 % of the syllabus, 31 % are subject

studies, 8% optional subjects and 21% teaching practice. Next to all these, students have 120 hours of recreation and 180 hours of concentrated teaching practice.

Table 1. The syllabus of the 3-year study programme for early years teachers.

SUBJECTS	No. of	TEACHING PRACTICE	
PROFESSIONAL STUDIES			
1. SLOVENE LANGUAGE			
2. DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY			
3. PSYCHOLOGY OF EDUCATION			
4. THEORY OF EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION			
5. DIDACTIC AND MEDIA			
6. SPECIAL EDUCATION			
7. METHODOLOGY OF EDUCATION			
8. MOTOR DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN			
9. HEALTH EDUCATION			
10. SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION			
11. PHILOSOPHY (SPECIAL TOPICS)			
SUBJECT STUDIES			
12. MOVEMENT EDUCATION AND SPORT			
13. DANCE EDUCATION			
14. MUSIC EDUCATION			
15. ART (DRAWING, PAINTING AND MODELLING)			
16. PUPPETRY, DRAMA AND FILM EDUCATION			
17. LANGUAGE EDUCATION (including children's literature)			
18. SOCIAL WORLD OF CHILDREN			
19. TECHNICAL EDUCATION			
20. NATURAL SCIENCES (biology, chemistry and physics) IN EARLY YEARS			
21. MATHEMATICS			
OPTIONAL SUBJECTS			
22. FIRST OPTIONAL SUBJECT (one of the subjects from 12 to 21)			
23. SECOND OPTIONAL SUBJECT (one of the subjects from 12 to 21)			

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SUBJECTS	NO. OF	TEACHING PRACTICE	
24. THIRD OPTIONAL SUBJECT ☐ ENGLISH LANGUAGE ☐ COMMUNICATION SKILLS ☐ METHODOLOGY OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ☐ SPECIAL EDUCATION	[illegible]		
INTEGRATED TEACHING PRACTICE	[illegible]	[illegible]	
TOTAL	[illegible]		
PHYSICAL TRAINING (recreation)	[illegible]		
CONCENTRATED TEACHING PRACTICE	[illegible]		

Early years education is distinctly an interdisciplinary field, where different sciences deal with the same phenomena and problems. In the programme, all professional subjects are interconnected, since education and the preschool child are the common denominator of all. These subjects also form the professional basis and starting points for specific subject studies where students add to their knowledge in different areas of science and art and become acquainted with the pedagogical principles and with the ways of imparting them to the children. On the other hand, all subjects in the group of subject studies also have to be interconnected. We believe that the early years teacher should in her/his activities be combining different subject areas, because children experience the world as a whole. The majority of professional subjects is planned at the beginning of studies, while there are more subjects of the group subject studies in the second and third study year. In the last year the students are offered those subjects, where the main aim is to trigger a critical reflection of acquired knowledge and of the early years education system (sociology, philosophy) and which demand of the students greater maturity. Optional subjects also appear in this final year, since the student must first know the foundations before being able to choose competently among them.

The aim of **integrated teaching practice** is to use the acquired theoretical knowledge in practical work and apply theoretical reflection of events in teaching practice. Hours planned for teaching practice are divided among subjects, so as to ensure better planning and right direction of teaching practice. Integrated teaching practice includes planned observation, analysis, demonstration hours in preschool institutions and field work. The aim of **concentrated teaching practice** in the second study year is to enable the student to familiarize himself with the kindergarten unit, kindergarten as a preschool institution, work of the early years teacher and problems connected with this work. (S)he can also try out her/his skills and knowledge acquired during her/his studies. During the teaching practice in the final year, the student more or less independently (under guidance) leads a unit and can see how well prepared (s)he is for the job. Teaching practice is

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carried out in preschool institutions chosen either by the student or by the programme director, in other institutions and as field practice.

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